

# The Fear Of Your Own Reflection

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HE PASSED UNNOTICED through the bodies on the high street, like a ghost. Tate was beside himself, walking. There was a familiar weight to the air. It was as if the world had exhausted itself and was leaning on him in its entirety. I had the advantage of being able to see the past and present, as one. From the right, I could see his past. He was pulled forward by his chest and each step claimed whatever ground it touched. But from the left, I saw him now, burying his gaze in the pavement. His shoulders were slightly hunched forward and his arms folded around a large brown envelope. It reminded me of all the patients I'd visited over the years. After just a few months of wearing a straitjacket, the muscles adjust to the pose and the only comfort they can find is in that position. Tate, like many before him, was 'fixed'.

I joined him again as he stepped into Ben's office. Ben managed only two or three acts, including Tate. His office was always filthy. Every time Tate had visited, the bin had not been emptied and the small flip-book calendar on his desk was a few days behind. Although Tate hadn't actually been to the office in the last six months, the routine never changed. Ben always pretended to be on the phone as his acts walked in. He'd then wave Tate in to sit down while he wrapped up the conversation, spending at least two minutes doing so.

“Sorry about that. Producers – you know?” he joked. “How was-” Ben glanced to his computer screen before continuing, “-that play, the audition?”

“It was fine. I only came by to drop off these headshots.” Tate placed the envelope on Ben’s cluttered desk. I knew what Ben was thinking. *Why have you made more headshots? You look the same as ever. I’m only going to use the ones you sent me last time.*

“Great!” He smiled. “Let’s have a look.”

Tate’s eyes found themselves focusing in on Ben’s fingertips as they moved slower and slower the more he noticed them. When they finally reached the envelope a strange fear came over him. He almost reached out to take the envelope back, but didn’t. The crunch of the paper as Ben picked up the envelope, slit straight through his spine. When the envelope was ripped open Tate’s body began to ache. He fought against himself by gripping the sides of the chair and tightening his muscles, refusing the urge to fold into himself like a car being crushed into a square. Ben dragged the headshots out of the envelope and looked at them in shock.

After a few seconds flicking between the pictures, he whispered, “I’ll get these out.”

The next time I saw Tate was in his home. The shop windows on the high street, the photo frame on Ben’s wall – I’ll give him this, he was doing well to avoid me. His house was in steady decline; stamped-out cigarette ashes were smudged like rain clouds into his carpet and a collection of circular coffee stains overlapped each other across the arms of his sofa. His knees creaked as he lowered himself into the cushions. He took out a pack of cigarettes. Only recently had the comfort of smoke set in, feeling like fresh air in and out of his lungs. I felt my chest being touched. *At the same time, Ben’s fingertips brushed across the laminate of the headshots, pushing them to one side.* Tate’s face became another piece of clutter on his desk, buried beneath another.

Tate watched the phone ring for a few seconds; it was Grace. He considered not answering. She’d already called him a few times today. He decided that he owed her at least one minute of conversation. As Tate spoke to her he began to think about

the last time they'd had sex. She had come over after the closing night of the play they co-starred in.

"Amazing – they said! Did you read it?" her voice squeaked through the phone.

"I heard it was good. You got a mention didn't you?"

"Yeah, they said my performance was *elatedly reserved!*"

Tate took the phone away from his mouth and sighed out smoke. He wasn't even sure how that was possible. He joked to himself about whether or not you could call Grace's acting a performance at all. I would have told him that his own was not much better, that night.

"Yeah, I remember reading that," he lied, "What are you doing now then?" he stubbed the cigarette out.

"What, right this second or generally?" she giggled.

Tate rolled his eyes and continued,

"Both, I suppose." He picked at the coffee stains as if they were scabs.

"Well, I've got an audition next week for a part in this new drama – honestly, you need to get yourself over to television. You're good looking enough for it – and right this second, I'm just on my own in my house." Her tone dropped off towards the end of the sentence as if she was trying to dim the lights on the conversation.

"Sounds lonely," he said, grinning slightly.

"It is..." She whispered. "You could come and keep me company if you wanted? We could celebrate the review..."

He'd never been to Grace's house before. It was much better kept than his and had actually been decorated by Grace herself. Tate had simply moved into a furnished house and never bothered to make it a home. It didn't take her long to make the first move. She leaned over and started to kiss Tate. He felt unusually nervous. He was not the same human he used to be – as much as he could pretend he was, depending on the company at hand. Grace placed her hand on his wrist and guided it up to her hips, like a puppeteer. I began to wonder if it mattered that Tate was Tate at all; maybe he was just on-call that day.

I found them again when they entered her room. There was nowhere for me to see them on their way upstairs. Tate's eyes

were closed. He was bending down slightly, making himself short enough to kiss Grace. He started unbuttoning his shirt. His muscles were still well defined even though he'd dropped his very precise and intense fitness regime. When his eyes opened, all his confidence vanished. He looked at the side of her bed. The wall was completely covered in mirrors. I stared at him and he was forced to stare back for the first time in six months. I could see myself through his eyes. The skin beneath my chin swung like an empty noose, my arms were strangled in varicose veins and there was a growing death around my eyes. He panicked and pulled at his neck. Frantic and beside himself again, he pulled and pulled but his skin felt fine. As she took off his shirt and started kissing his chest, he could only stare over her head at me. Her teeth bit into me and the loose flesh draped over her face like mouldy leather. Tate pushed away from Grace – afraid she could see.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He stood before her, but still he couldn't take his eyes off me. Grace turned her head to the mirror and smiled.

“Alright, Narcissus – come here.”

She sat down on the bed facing him, opened her legs and pulled him towards her. He tried to ignore me, but there was no-where to hide. He watched as a patch of my wrinkled flesh faded away, leaving only the reflection of the wall behind him. *Ben threw one of the headshots in the bin.* Tate felt a chill crawl through his stomach where I had vanished. Grace stared up at him.

“Tate, what’s the problem?” She looked at him with her eye brows pulled together in disgust.

He shook his head. He felt another chill down the left side of his face. He watched as mine dissolved. *The second photo fell.* Grace stood up. Tate didn't hear what she said. *The third and fourth scraped against each other.* He lost all feeling in his body that wasn't physical. He watched helplessly. Grace said something again. *Ben's fingertips grasped the last photo.* Tate suddenly returned to the room.

“If we're not going to do this could you just say so? I'm barely in the mood now.” Grace hissed.

Tate couldn't even look at her. *Ben dropped the last headshot.* The last of me disappeared. Tate's stomach fell like an anchor through water; his heart, the bow, was pulled under too.